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SUBJECT: HARD TIMES FOR RUSSIA'S HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY

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Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns: 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Civil society and liberal political party leaders are sharply divided over the role of NGOs in partisan politics. While Moscow's most prominent human rights activist strongly defends the policy of overt political opposition, many NGO representatives are uncomfortable with, or opposed to, anti-Putin campaigns. Other NGO leaders argue that the politicization of the human rights community reveals the extent to which Russia's "flagship" NGOs are far removed from the mainstream issues that concern most Russians, poorly equipped to build bridges to middle class Russia, dominated by leaders more comfortable with dissidence than dissent, and on the sidelines of social movements that may be the best hope for demanding GOR accountability. These nongovernmental organizations need to extend their outreach and appeal, and strengthen their own internal procedures and self-sustainability. To do that at a time when the NGO community is increasingly embattled, continued international support is crucial. End summary.

To Be, or Not To Be, Political

[1](#)2. (C) Debates in Russia over the role of NGOs in partisan politics have intensified, with back-to-back December sessions of the Second Human Rights Conference, the Civil Forum, and Other Russia precipitating open feuding among civil society and "democratic" party leaders, as well as the creation of yet another front -- the "Political Other Russia." Yabloko and SPS party chairmen publicly criticized Indem's Georgiy Satarov and Other Russia leader Garry Kasparov for using NGOs as vehicles for advancing their political agendas. Overt politicking, they argued, weakened the NGO movement and reinforced stereotypes that NGOs were mouthpieces for foreign (and hostile) interests. Privately, Demos Center's Tanya Lokshina, who has avoided any linkage between Demos and opposition politicians, told us that the division was deep, with many human rights activists insistent that the movement remain apolitical. Human Rights Watch Director Allison Gill termed the merger of human rights activists and opposition parties under the "Other Russia" banner a step backwards, as it led human rights groups to "hunker down" rather than expand their reach.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The doyenne of Russia's human rights movement, Moscow Helsinki Group Chairwoman Ludmila Alekseeva defended taking on the Putin government, while acknowledging the broader critique of human rights activists. She told us the fusion of human rights groups with opposition parties of all

stripes was legitimate, despite the public controversy and her own apprehensions about neo-Bolshevik Eduard Limonov and neo-Stalinist Anpilov. While Yeltsin's government violated democratic principles during the 1996 presidential elections, she explained, it did not threaten to destroy the rights of its citizenry. The Putin government, she maintained, was intent on doing so. It was time for Russian activists to bury political differences, and unite around a common opposition to the government.

¶4. (SBU) Alekseeva minimized the costs to the NGO movement of direct opposition to the government. The fact that Yabloko and SPS had refused to join Other Russia, she attributed to craven political interests in securing Kremlin support (or at least tolerance) during the 2007 elections. She noted the irony of having lost the democratic parties, while gaining the extreme nationalists as allies; at the same time, individual Yabloko and SPS members remained supportive.

While noting the accomplishments of the human rights community-- primarily, the establishment of a nationwide network, where none existed in 1976 -- Alekseeva was quick to concede its weakness. Of the 2,000-plus organizations, she noted, maybe 20 were influential. Even the most influential, she added, folding her own Moscow Helsinki Group into the mix, were weak structurally. By definition, she argued, human rights activists were "altruists" and not motivated by "interests"-- even important social interests that are fueling burgeoning grassroots movements against corruption, housing scams, pollution, and abuse of drivers by traffic police.

Human Rights: Unpopular; HR NGOs Disengaged

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¶5. (C) Contributing to the controversy over the role of human rights organizations is the fact that their work is still not viewed as vital by most Russians. Chairwoman of the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society Institutions and Democracy, Ella Pamfilova recently told Itar-Tass that human rights were not a priority for Russian citizens. She expressed frustration that Russians still do not understand that their living standards and social well-being are directly connected with the level of human rights and freedoms. Likewise, Moscow Ford Foundation Director Steven Solnick commented that only two percent of Russian citizens express concern about violations of civil liberties. A recent public opinion survey by the All-Russia Public Opinion Center, ranked human rights almost at the bottom of the list of pressing concerns. The overwhelming majority of citizens are focused on questions of economic and social justice. Head of Memorial Oleg Orlov concurred, saying that society is not active enough in protecting its rights because it has more immediate concerns.

¶6. (C) Solnick argues that these attitudes reflect the failure of human rights organizations to create linkages and constituencies with the population. Chairman of the Department of Political Science at the Institute of State and Law William Smirnov seconded Solnick, but traced the disconnect between human rights standard bearers and society to the failure of the former to speak out when Yeltsin attacked the White House or when the GOR in the '90s violated Russians' economic rights by failing to pay salaries or pensions on time.

¶7. (C) Many here believe that the human rights community was tarred by its too close association with the West. Smirnov is among those who argued that international human rights organizations had discredited themselves in the eyes of "average Russians," by worrying more about the rights of ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy than of those "whom he deceived in order to accumulate his fortune." The international community's preoccupation with human rights in

Chechnya resonated similarly with Russians, Smirnov continued. The perceived role of the United States in the economic difficulties experienced by many Russians in the '90s made it advisable, Smirnov said, that it "keep a low profile" on human rights issues.

¶8. (C) Deputy Chairman of Yabloko and Moscow City Duma Deputy Sergey Mitrokhin echoed this criticism, charging to us that human rights organizations issued "hysterical" pronouncements on events in Russia to please Western sponsors, without whom they would not have a leg to stand on.

Mitrokhin argued that human rights flagship organizations did not pay attention to the "vital" questions confronting average Russians. For example, there was no NGO to whom he could send petitioners complaining about housing and construction scams, which was one of the most pressing problems in urban Moscow. Until these NGOs broadened their focus, Mitrokhin concluded, they would remain on the fringes.

The Problem of Charismatic Leaders, and Sloppy Files

¶9. (C) Despite the intensive engagement of Western governments and NGOs, many of the flagship human rights organizations remain poorly equipped to function in the new Russia. Solnick itemized the shortcomings as follows: virtually none has a press secretary, a membership coordinator, or a fundraising strategy. They depend on a "charismatic leader" to pull in foreign grants. Ford's own efforts to provide USD two million in seed money for a completely indigenous human rights organization had come to naught. Ford had been unable to entice a Russian human rights organization to hire a director and become organized enough to tap into the Foundation's available monies. Over the last fifteen years, Solnick said, the international community has become an "enabler" of NGOs that cannot survive on their own. After five years of work in country, his personal conclusion was that many leading Russian human rights NGOs were undemocratic, non-transparent, and averse to courting public support. "When is the last time," he asked us, "that you've seen an NGO advertise for position of deputy director?"

¶10. (C) Human Rights Watch Director Allison Gill told us that even an NGO as respected as Memorial had not developed the professional management, nor had it diversified funding beyond its core Western donors. Memorial's Chechnya offices were currently unfunded while waiting for new grants to be disbursed, in large part because grant writing still fell to Memorial's executive director. The dissident past of many

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human rights leaders and organizations, she argued, left them ill-equipped and non-inclined toward professionalizing their organizations, or making themselves relevant to the Russian public. Moreover, some well-known NGOs are vulnerable to GOR tax and registration scrutiny by not adhering to transparent accounting. Few question the politicized nature of GOR tax reviews; however, in an era of greater GOR harassment, NGOs do not advance their cause by being vulnerable to charges of keeping double books, or not keeping books at all.

Is Dissidence the Right Course in Putin's Russia

¶11. (C) There is now a tendency, Gill told us, of human rights organizations reacting to the increasingly adversarial relationship with the GOR by reverting to the familiar methods of Soviet era dissidence. According to Director of the Donors Forum Natalya Kaminarskaya, Moscow Helsinki Group's Alekseeva's generation of human rights activists remained Soviet dissidents, who would always be "against whatever government was in power." If the human rights

movement was to make progress in Russia, it would have to let go of that past. Kaminarskaya believed there were ways to work with the authorities to achieve mutually desirable outcomes. She mentioned her work with the Ministry of Economics and the Public Chamber to get an endowments law developed. Although some compromises had to be made, she believed each side was satisfied with the final result. Kaminarskaya believed human rights organizations would not be discredited if they worked with the government on issues of common concern, like xenophobia. Kaminarskaya did not attend the Civil Congress or Other Russia conferences because "all they do is talk and make the same resolutions. Nothing concrete gets done."

¶12. (C) Solnick agreed that the various and sundry human rights congresses have become a "sideshow." The organizers do not have the moral legitimacy that certain dissidents of the Soviet period earned, and are not seen as moral compasses by the Russian populace. There are no modern Sakharovs; in part, he quickly noted, because the incorruptible and uncompromising, e.g., Politkovskaya, are increasingly being silenced. At the Second Human Rights Congress and Civil Forum, Embassy officers witnessed first-hand Solnick's description of a typical human rights gathering: charismatic leaders delivered repetitive speeches, uncoordinated among themselves, and lacking a coherent message or action plan.

Next Generation Still Waiting in the Wings

¶13. (C) Soviet-era human rights leaders continue to play a disproportionate leadership role in the human rights movement. Darya Miloslavskaya, local representative of the International Center for Non-Profit Law, said there was no room for new leaders. Ego and personalities played a large role in this, she thought, with the older generation of leaders not willing to make room for a new generation like Demos Foundation Chair Lokshina, who recently received the Andrey Sakharov Award; SOVA Deputy Head Galina Kozhevnikova; or herself. Solnick pointed to Lokshina's decision to leave Moscow Helsinki Group as emblematic of the fact that prominent human rights organizers were unwilling to cultivate the next generation of activists. Director of the Center for Extreme Journalism Oleg Panfilov agreed with Miloslavskaya, adding that a new generation of human rights leaders will probably emerge from the regions and from smaller NGOs, while the "dinosaurs" continue to monopolize the big cities and established NGOs.

Social Movements: Democracy's Guarantor?

¶14. (C) Increasingly, hopes are pinned here on the success of social movements -- often spontaneous, rarely registered, but sometimes effective citizen efforts to reverse bureaucratic wrongs and leadership indifference. Carnegie Foundation's Lilia Shevtsova told us that Russia's Western-oriented NGOs tended to underestimate these social movements, which do not speak the language of international human rights treaties, but are instead focused on concrete actions.

¶15. (C) Alekseeva does not necessarily disagree with this critique. On the one hand, she expressed admiration for Vyacheslav Lysakov, who spearheaded the grass roots movement that overturned the conviction of a driver falsely accused of being responsible for the automobile crash-related death of the Altai Governor, and identified defrauded apartment buyers

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and investors as two other potent movements. However, Alekseeva maintains a hands off attitude toward most of the other "movements", which she described as headed by people "who want to do good things," rather than "people who want to

fight for rights."

¶16. (C) Alekseeva concluded that she was an optimist. Russia was changing, Russian society was evolving, and social movements, "in the hundreds," would emerge as a force that could not be ignored by the Russian government, but would spur the development and strengthening of democratic institutions.

Comment

¶17. (C) The plight of Russia's flagship human rights organizations in many ways mirrors that of the country's liberal parties. Both, unfortunately, have failed to adapt in order to attract popular support and become self-sustaining. That said, at a time when non-governmental forces face more restrictions and a worsening environment, they need international support to stay afloat and continue their work. To help become self-sustaining and able to withstand intensifying government pressure, these organizations need more help with both internal institutional development, and external outreach. They themselves need to take a hard look at revamping their leadership, recruitment and public engagement strategies to become a more integral part of contemporary Russian society.
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